

Workers Struggles: The Americas

8 February 2000

Mexican workers protest closing of Alcoa aluminum plant

On January 21, more than 300 workers at the Alcoa maquiladora, Arneses de Juárez Plant No. 51 in Ciudad Juárez (across the border from El Paso, Texas), carried out a sit-down strike when the company announced it was not paying a severance package as agreed to last September. Some of the administrative personnel, managers and supervisors also joined in the sit-down strike at the US-owned aluminum facility.

Alcoa announced that it was closing the plant and had begun moving machinery to Torreón, Coahuila, a new plant with a lower wage workforce. Management said it would not give severance pay and that the workforce would be relocated to other plants in Ciudad Juárez. Instead, the company said, there would be a 2,000-peso bonus paid in two installments over a two-month period.

The company threatened to report to the conciliation and arbitration board if the workers did not accept the offer, alleging that the sit-down was illegal. At stake for the workers, many with up to 16 years' experience, are the loss of seniority and benefits and the possibility that the company could fire them at any time. Also, the new plants are far from where the workers reside, creating greater hardship because of poor transportation systems.

On January 24 the first shift workers joined the sit-down, which was initiated by the second shift. By the end of the day, 850 workers were involved. Two days later, a preliminary agreement was reached in which both sides agreed to negotiate on the percentage of severance to be paid. If the negotiations fail by January 31, the workers say they will carry out another sit-down strike and extend it to other plants.

Mexican auto workers threaten February 7 walkout

The National Independent Union of Auto Industry Workers has announced that a strike will begin on February 7 at three DINA bus plants in the city of Sahagun, in the state of Hidalgo, if management does not pay more than a 10 percent raise.

Union Secretary Lazaro Osorio Sanchez explained that the workers are demanding a 35 percent increase, the payment of a cost-of-living allowance that reflects recent price increases and other economic and non-economic benefits. DINA employs 3,000 workers in Sahagun.

The union also announced plans to launch a strike on April 1 at another Hidalgo plant, Autopartes Hidalguenses. These 200 workers are demanding a 45 percent wage increase.

Venezuelan oil workers threaten to strike

Fedepetrol, Venezuela's main oil workers union, threatened a strike against the Constituent Assembly's decision to suspend negotiations with the state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (Pdvs) for eight months. The Assembly made the decision on January 30 before suspending its own activities. Last month Fedepetrol struck for 24 hours to demand an 80 percent wage increase.

Union-busting in Nicaragua's free trade zone

The Nicaraguan Labor Ministry, the new management of Nicaragua's free trade zone and some factory managers are engaged in

an effort to rid the free trade zone of unions. Independent unions are recognized in five or more factories. Since January 17, mass firings have occurred at the US-owned Mil Colores factory, which produces Arizona Jeans (a JC Penney brand), as well as the No Fear and High Sierra brands.

In a number of recent statements and decisions, the new Minister of Labor has taken the side of factory managers and has given scant attention to evidence supporting claims by the unions. Also, the new management of the free trade zone is sending out strong signals that unions are not welcome. Although factory managers at Jem III and Mil Colores have been directly behind these firings, they now know that the zone management and the Labor Ministry will stand behind them.

Nicaraguan transport workers to strike against fuel price increases

The National Coordinating Organization for Transportation announced that it will paralyze Nicaragua to protest the continuing rise in fuel prices. It also threatened to raise fares.

Thousands of peasants fight military and police in Bolivia

More than 10,000 peasants fought police and the army on February 4 in Cochabamba, Bolivia to protest increases in water rates. Scores were wounded and arrested.

On the previous day, soldiers had set up barricades in Cochabamba, a city 500 miles southeast of La Paz, one of Bolivia's capitals, in an attempt to prevent a march by peasant unions and social organizations. As the battle began, the marchers were attacked with tear gas and other chemicals. This effectively made it impossible for the protesters to reach the Cochabamba's Center Square and administrative center.

The state forces also attacked reporters covering the scene. The confrontation lasted throughout the next morning before the peasants were forced to retreat. Those arrested are being charged with sedition and disturbing the peace.

Union sympathizer charges South Carolina company committed him to mental hospital

The National Labor Relations Board has ordered a hearing to hear allegations that plastics plant officials in South Carolina had an employee arrested and put in a mental hospital to stop his union activity. Gary McClain has sued his former employer, Tenneco Packaging, Aiken County Sheriff Howard Sellers and others, saying the company conspired with deputies to remove him from union activity. In its order issued January 31, the NLRB said there is reasonable cause to investigate McClain's allegations.

Although Tenneco was named in the order, the name of the company and its Beech Island plastics plant changed to Pactiv Corp. in November. Pactiv has two weeks to answer the allegations, which will be heard by an administrative law judge this month or in early March, the NLRB said.

McClain, who had worked at the plant for 17 years, said he was stopped by Aiken County sheriff's deputies on his way to work July 29

and arrested on a four-year-old misdemeanor warrant. He said he was taken to Aiken Regional Medical Centers and moved to Charter Rivers, a Columbia psychiatric hospital, where he was kept against his will for two weeks.

Organizers for the International Union of Operating Engineers said the ruling would strengthen their efforts at the plant. Russell Britt, business manager of three operating engineers' union locals, said the ruling should be a boost to workers, many of whom he said were "really scared after what happened to Gary McClain."

Alabama marble company fights unionizing drive

The Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union (PACE) has filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board accusing a Sylacauga, Alabama plant's managers of unfair labor tactics. The union, which has mounted an organizing drive at Georgia Marble in Sylacauga since June, says plant managers have harassed, threatened and spied on union supporters. Imerys, a French conglomerate, dissolved the union after acquiring Georgia Marble and combined the plant with a larger non-union plant next door. About 120 workers at Georgia Marble had been unionized since 1972.

Ramp and cargo workers voting for union representation at Delta Air Lines

Ramp and cargo workers are voting on union representation at Delta Air Lines, the nation's third-largest carrier and least unionized of the major US airlines. The *Wall Street Journal* reported last week that the company is mounting an aggressive campaign for a no vote in its first major union election in more than three decades.

Delta CEO Leo Mullin says the airline's employees already enjoy pay and benefits at the top end of the industry, and has called on workers to reject "outsiders" in favor of a "partnership" with management. In videos, leaflets and lectures to workers Delta management has argued against workers joining the Transport Workers Union (TWU).

On Wall Street Delta's largely union-free status—only its pilots and a handful of dispatchers and ground instructors are organized—is considered a competitive advantage over other carriers. But there is widespread bitterness among workers over the layoffs, wage cuts and tougher working conditions that were imposed by the airline in the mid-1990s. In a shock to Delta's management, the TWU gathered signatures from about 35 percent of the ramp workers in December.

The National Mediation Board mailed ballots to Delta's 11,000 ramp and cargo workers in late January, and vote tallying is expected to be concluded by March 3. If the TWU wins the vote it could improve the union's chances of organizing Delta's 20,000 flight attendants, 9,000 mechanics and 16,000 ticket and reservation agents.

Montreal transit workers face reprisals after staging protests

Employees of the Montreal Urban Community Transit Corporation (MUCTC) mounted an 80-bus demonstration outside MUCTC headquarters last Friday, following several days of work slowdowns and protests.

The unions representing the MUCTC's 3,700 bus and subway drivers and 2,200 maintenance workers are demanding a 15 percent wage increase over three years. The transit authority is offering wage increases totaling just 5 percent. Another contentious issue is the MUCTC's unilateral imposition of a three-year moratorium on its contributions to the employee pension fund., which the MUCTC claims is overfunded. The unions are insisting that the money "rightfully belongs to the workers" and want the multimillion dollar surplus returned to employees as indexed pensions and improved

benefits. In the past, transit employees contributed 6 percent of their gross earnings toward their pension fund, while the MUCTC contributed 12 percent.

Robert Olivier, the transit corporation's director of planning and development, has said that the MUCTC will not touch money already in the pension fund, but will use some of the surplus to balance its 2000 budget, adding that Hydro-Quebec and the Montreal police have taken similar steps. The main source of the problem lies in the provincial Parti Quebecois government's program of budget cutting. As a result of cuts in provincial support to public transit, the Montreal authority was facing a \$23 million budget deficit until it decided to stop making its pension contributions.

Both unions' collective agreements expired last month and both have rank-and-file mandates to call a 24-hour strike. Should the unions call a walkout, they would be legally obliged to give seven days' notice and to provide "essential services."

In the past, Quebec governments have repeatedly used anti-union legislation against Montreal's transit workers, including placing the mechanics' union under government trusteeship for two years in the 1980s. The MUCTC has said it will take disciplinary action against workers involved in last week's protests and will dock workers pay if slowdowns in bus and subway service and repairs continue.

BC Rail workers narrowly approve agreement

BC Rail's 1,600 unionized workers voted 59.5 percent in favor of a three-year contract, of which two years have already expired. According to the New Democratic Party (NDP) government's imposed wage guidelines for the public sector, the collective agreement guarantees workers a paltry 2 percent wage increase this year—the first increase in five years.

The unionized workers voted on the collective agreement just prior to last week's announcement that 35 top civil servants in the British Columbia government will be receiving large annual pay increases, some more than 20 percent. Ross Peterson, vice-chairman of the Council of Trade Unions, representing seven unions at the railway, including the Teamsters, said that the union's mail-in ballots were sent out well before the civil servant pay increases were made public, otherwise workers wouldn't have approved the contract. "We'd have rocks in our head to put the vote out today."

Workers had been locked out by the Crown corporation for 11 days before the government stepped in. Unionized workers voted on the agreement after BC Rail removed its proposal for a two-tiered wage structure that would have given new employees 80 percent of the wages of current employees. BC also dropped its demand for a 20 percent cut to its unionized workforce. The Council of Trade Unions' lawyers are now investigating the possibility that some workers will not receive statutory holiday pay for work done during Christmas.



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